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ABSTRACT

Instructors of Composition I at Lansing Community College (LCC) in Lansing, Michigan, are required by the Department of Communication to grade a paper in four areas: content, structure, style, and mechanics. The policy, in effect in its present form since 1982, places heavy emphasis upon the conventions or "mechanics" of writing Edited American English. The status of the place of grammar in the writing class in American education has had its ups and downs, especially in the last hundred years. Researchers have tried to demonstrate both sides of the question of whether the study of grammar contributes to good writing. The debate of teaching grammar in a composition classroom has devolved into a debate of mechanics. Researchers and composition instructors have also debated the value of and the best procedures for marking students' errors. A first-time freshman composition instructor at LCC examined the effectiveness of the mandated grading procedures over the course of a semester. Results indicated: (1) no significant difference between the students' performance on Essay 1 and Essay 5; (2) students' grade on mechanics did not predict their performance on the essay in general; and (3) some students made fewer of some kinds of errors only to make more of other kinds of errors. Avoiding grammar instruction because some studies suggest its inefficacy seems biased. If a particular student or section of a class needs instruction, it is irresponsible not to provide it. (Contains 35 references and 9 tables of data.) (RS)

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ED 411 525

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An Evaluation of the Effects of a Departmentally Mandated Error Response Procedure on Essay Grades

Instructors of Composition I (WRIT 121) at Lansing Community College (LCC) in Lansing, Michigan are required by the Department of Communication (DOC) to grade a paper in four areas: content, structure, style, and mechanics. The average of the grades in the first three areas makes up the grade for the paper unless the grade for mechanics is more than 1.0 lower than that average. In other words, a paper's grade cannot be more than 1.0 higher than the grade for mechanics. For example, if an essay receives a 3.5 in content, a 3.0 in structure, and a 2.5 in style (which averages to 3.0), but it receives a 1.0 in mechanics, the grade for the paper will be 2.0 (DOC, *Procedures*, p. 1). The DOC calls this its "Mechanics Anchor."

The Mechanics Anchor policy is outlined in the department's *Writing Standards*, a copy of which is attached to the syllabus given to both students and instructors. The policy as stated in this document is as follows:

> The Communication Department's *Writing Standards* place heavy emphasis upon the conventions or "mechanics" of writing Edited American English. The overall grade on a paper may be no more than one whole number grade higher than the mechanics grade. If the mechanics grade falls below the 0.0 range, the overall grade on a paper will be 0.0, regardless of grades in content, structure, and style.

The mechanics grade for 500-750 word essays will be assigned as follows:

4.0 (excellent)	0-1 error points
3.5	2-3 error points
3.0 (good)	4-5 error points
2.5	6-7 error points

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2.0 (satisfactory)	8-11 error points
1.5	12-13 error points
1.0 (poor)	14-15 error points
0.0 (failure)	16-20 error points
0.0 (failure on essay)	more than 20 error points

Assigning Error Points:

> 1. One point errors: spelling, manuscript form. (Note: subsequent misspellings of the same word should not be counted.)
>
> punctuation, for example use of commas in series, to separate main clauses, with restrictive/nonrestrictive clauses and phrases; use of semicolons to separate main clauses; use of colons to separate main clauses and to introduce formal appositives; superfluous use of commas, semicolons and colons; use of end punctuation.
>
> grammar, for example verb forms, agreement, case (including use of apostrophes) and adjective-adverb usage. (Note: subsequent apostrophe errors on the same word should not be counted.)
>
> 2. Two point errors: major mechanical errors–fused sentences, rhetorically ineffective sentence fragments and comma splices. (DOC, *Standards*, p. 4)

The above policy, which has been in effect in its present form since 1982 and in other forms for several years before that (Tim Miank, personal communication, December 7, 1995), is controversial, both inside and (in concept) outside LCC. Inside LCC, Robert Bently points out that the Department of Humanities criticizes the policy as being too harsh, especially the failing grade mandated for papers containing more than 20 errors (1991, p. 4). Outside LCC, the criticism is perhaps best summarized by Daniel and Murphy (1995), writing about freshman composition courses in general:

> The best construction that can be put on college composition courses is that they continue the high school instruction, providing a transition to college education, raising the stakes, and reminding students that, no matter what their educational level, someone is always ready to snag them if they wander into error. At their worst, first- and second-year composition courses are bereft of content or context, unmoored to recognizable educational objectives. (p. 229)

Even though it is an important issue, whether LCC's composition courses lack content or context in general will not be addressed in this paper. As for LCC's error policy, it does set out to "snag" students. Bently puts it this way (paraphrasing Lunsford and Connors): "In the Lansing Community College transfer writing program, like it or not, pointing out errors is a part of what we are expected to do" (1991, p. 2). The validity of this educational objective has been extensively debated in the field.

In this paper, I will provide a brief overview of the debate in the field, a debate I've divided into two areas: (1) teaching grammar in the writing class and (2) the concept of error. Lastly, I will report the results of my application of LCC's Mechanics Anchor to the section of WRIT 121 I taught in the fall semester of 1995.

Grammar and the Writing Class

The status of the place of grammar in the writing class has had its ups and downs, especially in the last hundred years. According to Gina Claywell (1995), grammar became less important in the 1890s (p. 48), but by 1910, its position was solidified in the current-traditional approach to teaching writing. However, she reports that its status was again being called into question in the early 1950s, as it was becoming difficult to find specific high school courses in grammar (p. 49-50). Claywell states that "concepts often considered to be recent developments in composition were being considered by 1951" (p. 50); specifically:

> Whatever form the written composition takes, it should come through the experience of the student and for the purpose of communication. Drillwork on correct punctuation and grammar should come only when the need arises out of the pupil's work. (Clifton, as cited in Claywell, p. 50)

According to Ray Wallace (1995), questions surrounding the teaching of grammar have been debated since at least 1945, when the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) established a commission to study the issue. He further explains that the impetus for abolishing grammar in writing classrooms began in the 1960s as

researcher/teachers such as Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer began to adopt "process" teaching over "product" teaching (Claywell, 1995, and Hill, 1990, also credit these researchers). Such a switch highlighted the unprocess-like nature of grammar–as Wallace explains:

> Because of the traditional distinctions made among invention, style, and arrangement, modern composition theory had difficulty justifying instruction in grammar. Like style and arrangement, grammar is believed to be a feature of the product, and because the process approach emphasizes invention, grammar has no place in writing instruction. (p. 2)[1]

The process-theorists' position was supported by the NCTE via a position statement by its Commission on Composition, as explained by Wallace. He quotes from the statement: "writing teachers who write know that effective comments do not focus on pointing out errors, but go on to the more productive task of encouraging revision" (1995, p. 3). NCTE's own position statement adds that "students should 'learn grammar and usage by studying how their own language works in context'" (Wallace, 1995, p. 3). However, both Wallace and Claywell question the research that lead to the downplay of grammar. Wallace calls it "unsubstantiated" (p. 2) and Claywell believes "statements by researchers such as . . . Braddock, . . . Lloyd-Jones, and . . . Schoer . . . were taken out of context and wrongly interpreted" (1995, p. 50). Wallace acknowledges that studies–such as George Hillocks' 1976 *Research on Written Composition*–"dismiss the study of grammar as having no effect on the composing process," but he points out that various researchers/teachers have recently spent a great deal of "time writing . . . many articles, textbooks, and handbooks focusing on error, style, and editing" (p.1). He feels this is a contradiction that needs explaining (p. 2). Joan Mullin puts it another way:

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[1]Interestingly, David Blakesley discusses "viewing grammar as an aspect of rhetorical invention" (1995, p. 202).

> Our profession, our research, our dissemination of research through journals and conferences, and our handbooks do not go far enough towards changing our students' or instructors' assumptions about the use of grammar. . . . By downplaying in language arts, English, or composition classes the importance of grammar, or by relegating grammar to handbooks, as is current practice, we may be avoiding a professional self-examination that is long overdue. (1995, 109)

In an attempt to explain this contradiction and provide such a self-examination, Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace published a collection of essays that support the teaching of grammar in the classroom (1995); Wallace, Claywell, Daniel and Murphy, and Mullin, all quoted above, are in this text, as are many of the authors quoted below. Among other things, they explore various studies of the connections between grammar instruction and writing.

R. Baird Shuman (1995) states that researchers have tried to demonstrate both sides of the question of whether the study of grammar contributes to good writing, and he briefly summarizes their arguments, citing Neulieb, Kolln, Brosnahan, Hoyt, DeBoer, Meckel, Sutton, Hartwell, and Sanborn. He concludes that pro or con, "most people who have thought the matter through acknowledge that people's backgrounds have more to do with the way they speak and write than does the study of formal grammar" (p. 116). Furthermore, he believes that "an awareness of how language operates helps students to write effectively, but this awareness comes from many sources, among the least of which seems to be the systematic study of formal, school grammar" (117). Others cite these and other studies as well, in varying degrees of emphasis and interrelation. For example, Daniel and Murphy cite Hartwell, Hillocks, and Crowley as concluding that "studying grammar at the sentence level has no positive affect on writing skills" (1995, p. 228). Patrick Hartwell in turn quotes Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's 1963 conclusion which itself draws on other studies:

> in view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing. (1995, p. 163)

Hartwell continues by stating that Kolln's review of five studies and Neuleib's review of five different studies both conclude that not only does grammar instruction not improve writing–it also has no effect on "their ability to avoid error" (p. 163). John Edlund cites Hillocks as agreeing that grammar and mechanics instruction can hurt students: "In some studies a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage (e.g., marking every error) resulted in significant losses in overall quality" (1995, p. 89). Despite all of these studies, however, there are researchers/teachers who question the results, or at least want to see studies of a different nature.

Hartwell strongly questions the results of these studies, stating that "seventy-five years of experimental research has for all practical purposes told us nothing[;] . . . . [t]he two sides are unable to agree on how to interpret such research" (1990, p. 164). He provides a New Zealand study as an illustration of how the two sides argue over data. The study, conducted by Elley, Barham, Lamb and Wyllie, concluded "that the formal study of grammar, whether transformational or traditional, improved neither writing quality nor control over surface correctness" (p. 164). Hartwell reports that Petrosky agreed with this conclusion and called it "unquestionable"; Neulieb questioned the generalization of the findings; Kolln called it "suspicious"; and Mellon used the study "to defend the teaching of grammar" as he felt it "shows that teaching grammar does no harm" (p. 164). Thus, Hartwell questions the value of experimental research in resolving "the grammar issue" in that "any experimental design can be nitpicked, any experimental population can be criticized, and any experimental conclusion can be

questioned or, more often, ignored" (p. 164).[2] As Jon Olson points out, Hartwell is attempting "to *prove* . . . that empirical research won't resolve the debate over whether grammar instruction improves writing" (1995, p. 40). Noguchi sums up the problem this way: "I believe the hard-line anti grammar teachers with their reluctance to address . . . errors in a systematic way are just as misguided and self-defeating as the hard-line pro grammar teachers who addresses them with over exuberance[;] . . . . [w]hat seems lost in these internecine battles is the middle ground" (as cited in Claywell, 1995, p. 50).

As for wanting to see studies of a different nature, or at least to see them differently, Edlund cites Rei Noguchi as believing "just because formal instruction in grammar proves generally unproductive in improving writing does not necessarily mean that we should discard all aspects of grammar instruction" (1995, p. 90). Edlund acknowledges that "empirical studies have shown that grammar instruction does not correlate with writing improvement" and asserts that "we must know why, and we must know what we should be doing instead" (p. 90). To explain why, Edlund goes into great detail about the descriptivist/prescriptivist debate, Stephen Krashen's language acquisition theory, the "problem of ongoing linguistic change," M. A. K. Halliday's "grammar-constructed reality," and "the writing teacher's perspective" (p. 91). To explain what we should be doing instead is more difficult.

Ross points out that a need for such advice to teachers has been around since at least 1945 when the NCTE established the Commission on the English Curriculum, but that the NCTE failed to address this need. He looks at how its work, published between 1952 and 1965, affected grammar teaching–specifically, how its work dealt with "the interrelatedness of grammar instruction and composition instruction" (1995, p. 72). He explains the position of the work in terms of other work during the same time: Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) and *The Aspects of Theory of Syntax* (1965); and

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[2]For an interesting exploration of Hartwell's argument (among others) in detail, see Hill (1990).

Fries' *Structure of American English* (1952). Ross concludes that the NCTE work ignored the issue of "grammar teaching and its relationship to writing" in that there was "no useful advice for the teacher of writing" (p. 72). In short, they offered "little to teachers or students of writing" beyond stating the obvious, namely:

> three major factors to be taken into account in planning a program in grammar [are]: (1) individuals differ in the extent to which they can profit from instruction in grammar; (2) the desire to improve one's language is fundamental to success in doing so; and (3) knowledge about language is not the same thing as ability to use language effectively. (NCTE Commission [volume 1 of their report] as cited in Ross, p. 73)

Beyond this, the commission did not "offer any curriculum plan for integrating grammar instruction into English education" (p. 73). In regard to grammar's role in college classrooms, Ross points out that the situation is the same, as there is no direction for teaching the connection between writing and grammar (p. 84). However, he notes how Robert Gorrell, one of the NCTE Commission authors, believes that "too many English departments are 'strongly wedded to prescriptive grammar'" and the desire to make students "comfortable in standard English" (p. 84). However, again, there are no suggestions: "we cannot conclude that the teaching of formal grammar is a waste of time or even that it should not be included in the composition course" (Gorrell, as cited in Ross, p. 85). Rather, the entire report was concerned with teaching teachers "how to teach literature" (p. 86). However, he points out that work outside of the NCTE's 20-year project concerned itself with writing and grammar and cites Bloomfield, Pike, Fries, Harris and Chomsky as examples (p. 86).

The difficulty in determining what to teach instead revolves around several other issues. Daniel and Murphy state that how writing should be taught depends on three principles: (1) "grammar as a writing issue . . . usually . . . refer[s] . . . to usage conventions that have little to do with logic or linguistic meaning" in that

conventions in writing are "essentially arbitrary and have more to do with class distinction, ethnic difference, apparent educational level, and professional field than they do with effective communication[;]" (2) conventions in writing "are learned the same way speech is acquired, by practice and error and correction" which means that "every student becomes a good writer by writing with and for some audience, perhaps a teacher who can monitor and correct the writing in progress[;]" and (3) "students intelligent enough to be in college are capable of learning what they need to learn when the need is matched to their intellectual interests [and therefore] . . . . the place to learn writing is in the context of learning a discipline or a profession . . . . [suggesting] that universities should eliminate first-year composition" (1995, p. 233). Other researchers would both support and counter these principles.

As for the first principle, Shuman states that "people who talk about grammatical errors usually mean errors in spelling, punctuation, or usage, none of which relate directly to grammar in a sophisticated sense" (1995, p. 115). Mullin questions the role of language in terms of the importance of grammar rules and touches on the "conflicts over dialect usage" (1995, p. 110), concluding that "if we continue to assume there is one correct way to think, and therefore one correct way to express that thinking, then grammar will continue to be taught as a series of external rules that ignore the already present set of oral customs internalized by students before entering any educational institution" (p. 111). Olson discusses how "a focus on errors in form seems inherently more *ex*clusive than *in*clusive" (1995, p. 40). And Claywell speaks of "the students' right to their own language[,]" which, combined with "the open-door policy among colleges and universities and the resulting influx of students, and an increasing reliance on using the revision stage (and word processing programs) to 'catch' any grammatical problems" has lead to a de-emphasis on grammar (1995, p. 50). However, some argue that students must learn grammar in order to be empowered (Grover & Stay, 1995, p. 135; Claywell, 1995, p. 51). Hartwell states that "at

no point in the English curriculum is the question of power more blatantly posed than in the issue of formal grammar instruction" (1990, p. 180).

As for Daniel and Murphy's second principle, both Mina Shaughnessy (1977, pp. 5, 87) and David Bartholomae (1986, p. 80) state that lots of writing practice will take care of errors, especially "syntactic problems" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 5) and errors resulting from accident, "distractions caused by the demands of making letters on a page," and interference errors (Bartholomae, 1980, p. 80). Bartholomae takes this point a step further by stating that "if these errors will disappear in reasonable time anyway, . . . then it makes no sense to waste time teaching to them[;] . . . [n]ot only is such teaching inefficient, but it is also likely to produce the kind of nervousness about making mistakes that will keep a student from experimenting" (1980, p. 80). In regard to the relationship between writing and speech, Bartholomae is careful to point out that "formal, written discourse . . . [is] learned not through speaking and listening but through reading and writing" (1980, p. 259). Furthermore, he points out how students often unconsciously correct errors when reading a paper out loud, which suggests a difference between spoken and written language (1980, p. 262).

As for the third principle that states that freshman composition should be eliminated because college students should be intelligent enough to learn what they need to within their own disciplines, Mullin states that "little direct relationship has been shown to exist between people's intellect and their ability to spell, punctuate, make their verbs agree with their nouns, and make pronouns agree with their antecedents" (1995, p. 116). And with the open-door policy, many students may need to be brought up to the level of intelligence required for college. In relation to "context," Daniel and Murphy agree that "usage conventions vary with the writing situation" (1995, p. 226). However, Glover and Stay, drawing on Shaughnessy, emphasize "the development of grammatical understanding [to] enable . . . a student to build a paradigm through which to view the world and act in it through language, a

paradigm that a student can apply in a variety of contexts" (1995, p. 130). And in regard to eliminating freshman composition, Bently would disagree, as he sees the intention of the course to "produce students who can write essay exams and term papers competent in content, structure, style, spelling, grammar and punctuation" (1991, p. 2). This agreement and disagreement with Daniel and Murphy's three principles is not out of line with the agreement and disagreement in determining what to teach in terms of grammar and writing.

Other issues involved in relation to determining what to teach include both teacher perceptions and student perceptions of what should be taught. As for teacher perceptions, Brosnahan and Neuleib (1995) want to define the relationship between grammar teaching and editing. They point out that no research has been done on "differing methods of teaching grammar and their effects on grammar learning, nor has it been investigated what approaches to writing do help students improve their editing skills" (p. 205). They go on to point out that "even were composing researchers to discover that some specific methods for teaching grammar do improve style and editing skills, students with differing talents and abilities would still write and edit differently" (p. 205).

As for student perceptions, Joan Mullin discusses "student's tendencies to equate good papers with good grammar" and that she often has students come to her writing center to have their grammar "fixed" in order to "receive approval" (1995, p. 103). As Connors and Lunsford put it:

> The world judges a writer by her mastery of conventions, and we all know it. Students, parents, university colleagues, and administrators expect us to deal somehow with those unmet rhetorical expectations, and, like it or not, pointing out errors seems to most of us part of what we do. (1988, p. 396)

Timmons (1987, p. 19), Shaughnessy (1977, p. 8), Shuman (1995, p. 116), Sloan (1990, p. 299), and Bently (1991, p. 1) agree that much importance is placed on being correct.

Shaughnessy emphasizes that "even slight departures from a code cost the writer something, in whatever system he happens to be communicating, and given the hard bargain he must drive with his reader, he usually cannot afford many of them" (1977, p. 12-13). Sloan states that "errors are said to distract readers or to weaken the writer's credibility even when the errors do not obscure meaning" (1990, p. 299). Even given this importance, however, Laurence cautions that "students . . . become obsessively involved with the making, recognizing, and correcting of errors at the cost of linguistic understanding and the full expression of their thoughts and feelings in writing" (1975, p. 23). Shaughnessy also emphasizes linguistic understanding:

> There is a difference between the punctuation of a writer who knows but does not care and the writer who, no matter how careful he may be, lacks the information he needs to make secure judgments about written sentences. These judgments must grow out of a familiarity with the sentence as a grammatical unit. . . . (1977, p. 27)

DeMario, however, states that "most students cannot learn to care about the correctness of the sentences they write until they care about what they say and how they say it" (1986, p. 96). As for the students themselves, Reed and Burton found through a survey of freshman writers that 88% "felt that essays should be evaluated for both content and grammar" (1981, p. 5). Daniel and Murphy conclude that:

> Correcting errors is a reasonable goal. It is not the same goal as writing well. But it may help the struggling student avoid the sharp red pen of the teacher in a college course. Similarly, avoiding error may protect the job of a manager in industry. (1995, p. 229)

The debate of teaching grammar in a composition classroom, then, has devolved into a debate of mechanics.

That the debate over grammar is often a debate over mechanics is typical, according to Daniel and Murphy. Daniel and Murphy define the term *grammar* as comprising

> three discrete levels of human behavior: (1) grammar as a field of inquiry, a branch of the social science of linguistics; (2) grammar as internalized language rules (Noam Chomsky's *Competence*) or an abstract system (Ferdinand de Saussure's *la langue*) that enables us to create and utter spoken language; and (3) grammar as a set of conventions, collectively known as usage, that govern written discourse. (1995, pp. 225-226)

It is with the second level of grammar in which "those who complain about student writing typically believe students have inadequate or defective grammar" (p. 226). However, Glover and Stay point out that "Mina Shaughnessy recognized this difference between grammatical understanding and grammatical correctness[;] namely, "the goal of teaching grammar . . . ought to be a 'shift in perception which is ultimately more important than the mastery of any individual rule of grammar'" (1995, p. 130). They state: "For Shaughnessy, having the right answers is less important than having grammatical reasons for what a writer does, because 'grammar is more a way of thinking, a style of inquiry than a way of being right'" (p. 130). DeMario expresses a similar idea:

> The habit of writing to please a teacher becomes less and less appropriate as the sense of what writing is good for becomes clear. Punctuation, syntax, capitalization, spelling, paragraphing–the usual subjects of a writing class–are talked about as an integral part of the writer's effort to articulate his ideas in writing in a way that makes sense to him and to others. (1986, p. 97)

In this way then, the teaching of grammar is important to improving writing. As Claywell concludes, drawing on Noguchi, grammar should be taught "not 'as an academic subject' but as 'a tool for writing improvement'" (1995, p. 52). In answer to

Edlund's question, this is perhaps "what we should be doing instead" (1995, p. 90). In order to understand how to do this, it helps to look at the concept of error.

The Concept of Error

As observed by Haswell, "in the very act of marking, teachers at all levels usually begin with error" (1988, p. 480). And the error they concentrate on is surface error, because "they are just that, on the surface, hence seen first and easily" (1988, p. 480). Faigley, quoting Emig, calls this a "futile and unrewarding exercise" as again, "there is little evidence . . . that the persistent pointing out of specific errors in student themes leads to the elimination of these errors" (1992, p. 58). DeMario states that "since the mechanical writing errors that adults make tend to be idiosyncratic, it is not always useful to spend many classroom hours in a general discussion of mechanical errors[;] . . . . [b]ut . . . the needs of the group must dictate the most profitable use of time" (1986, p. 98). However, not all errors are surface errors. In order to determine needs and to differentiate the types of errors, Bartholomae (1980) recommends using error analysis.

Bartholomae explains that error analysis is the recognition that errors fall into various categories and have various causes and interpretations, such as accidental errors, errors in dialect, or interlanguage errors (1980, pp. 257-258). Hull (1986) explains that "patterns of error and the sources of these patterns can be inferred from a close reading of texts or language samples" and that once the pattern is known, it can be corrected (p. 209). It is not, however, just a matter of making lists of student errors and searching for patterns, according to Bartholomae (1980). Error analysis "begins with the double perspective of text and reconstructed text and seeks to explain the difference between the two on the basis of whatever can be inferred about the meaning of the text and the process of creating it" (p. 265). He discusses the value of categorizing errors by providing a writing sample where there are 40 errors in the first 200 words; however,

they fall into only four categories. The student can be helped by a teacher's instruction in these four categories, instead of being overwhelmed by 40 red marks (p. 260).

Various researchers have attempted to create lists of usual types of errors in freshman writing. For example, Shaughnessy includes verb form errors, pronoun case, tense switches across sentences, broken parallels, and dangling modifiers, among others (1977, p. 91). She also states that punctuation errors are the bane of inexperienced writers (1988, p. 16):

> limited mainly to commas and periods, the inexperienced writer is further restricted by his uncertain use of these marks: commas appear at odd junctures within sentences, and . . . the writer frequently mistakes a fragment for a whole sentence or joins two sentences with a comma (comma splice) or with no punctuation at all (run-on). (1977, p. 17)

According to Connors and Lunsford, such error-frequency studies were quite popular between 1915 and 1935 when at least 30 studies were conducted, but most of them "were flawed in some ways: too small a data sample, too regional a data sample, different definitions of errors, faulty methodologies . . ." (1988, p. 397). In regard to studies that report on error types across levels, Haswell points out that "attention to context is crucial in understanding error" (1988, p. 482). For example, he states that to simply conclude that seniors make more misspellings than freshman, as Kitzhaber does in a 1963 study, is misleading because the words seniors are trying to spell are not the same words freshman are (p. 482). There are other concerns as well, however. Even though Daniel and Murphy state that "the success of an error-centered approach is dubious" (1995, p. 229), studies have shown that error is "among the top three predictors" of quality judgment by teachers using a holistic grading practice (along with essay length and vocabulary), as reported by Haswell (1988, p. 480). He gives Freedman's "careful" 1980 study as an example; in this study, teachers agreed about mechanics more than organization, context, and sentence structure (p. 480). Haswell

states that similar results were achieved in a 1981 study by Greenbaum and Taylor even though teachers "had trouble naming error, mislabeling or not labeling 35% of the mistakes" (p. 480). That teachers fail to mark errors appears to be common–according to Mullin, Connors and Lunsford similarly found that some teachers were failing to mark errors (1995, p. 107). Mullin states that whether this was due to "grading 'exhaustion' or to tolerance would demand further study" (p. 107). Regardless, Shaughnessy concludes that:

> We can expect within a semester of instruction a clear indication of control over errors in punctuation and grammar, provided this is a feature of instruction either in the class or in conferences. Errors will remain, but for most students the errors should begin to appear residual rather than dominant. (1977, p. 276)

Which leads to a discussion of how error correction should be taught.

Several researchers/teachers indicated that they taught students to see their own errors (e.g., Bartholomae and Petrosky, 1986, p. 68; Hull, 1986, p. 200). Bartholomae states:

> By having students share in the process of investigating and interpreting the patterns of error in their writing, we can help them begin to see those errors as evidence of hypotheses or strategies they have formed and, as a consequence, put them in a position to change, experiment, imagine other strategies. Studying their own writing puts students in a position to see themselves as language users, rather than as victims of a language that uses them. (1980, p. 258)

Bartholomae (1986, p. 80) and Hull (1986, p. 215) both state that this should be done in conferences.[3] Haswell explains that he puts check marks in the margins next to the sentences containing errors, but that he provides no other information. He then allows the students to correct the errors in a 15-minute period, and after looking at the papers again, if an error remains, he will correct it (1983, p. 601). He found that for one

[3]Rule, 1993, discusses helpful conferencing techniques.

of his classes, students were able to self-correct 61% of their own errors this way (p. 602). DeMario also uses check marks (1986, p. 97). However, Timmons reports that having students find and mark their own errors is better than marking the errors for them (1987, pp. 19-20). In any case, Bartholomae emphasizes that "a core of error that the student cannot find or does not have the resources to correct . . . would require some formal instruction" (1986, p. 81). And Crowley warns that "nothing stifles composing quite so quickly as trying to edit too soon" (1994, p. 238). Others support this by stating that a teacher must help students differentiate between editing and revising (Lindeman, 1995, p. 29; Olson, 1995, p. 39; Selfe, 1985, p. 91). In short, as stated by Shaughnessy, "errors matter" (1977, p. 13).

Writing 121: Composition I, Fall Semester, 1995, Lansing Community College

In the fall term of 1990, Robert Bently studied eleven sections of WRIT 121 to determine whether the Department of Communication's Mechanics Anchor was too harsh, as some members of the Humanities Department claimed (1991, p. 4). He found a statistically significant reduction in errors between the first and last essays (mean errors went from 9.14 to 6.77). When he factored in results from the second course students take (WRIT 122), he found an approximately 50% drop in errors between the first essay in 121 and the last essay in 122 (1991, pp. 8-9, Appendix 2). In a similar study, Haswell (1993, p. 603) found a 52% reduction in errors (he studied 69 students, out of which only four did not improve; as explained above [p. 16], his method was to use check marks in the margins). What does this mean though? According to Bently, it means that LCC's "rigorous error-count system gets some results" (p. 9). As for what these results are, he offers two examples: (1) the students learn to edit and (2) negative reinforcement works (p. 10). He concludes by wondering if students would do "even better if we made the standards even *harsher*" (p. 10; emphasis in original). He is

assuming, however, that the marking of errors accounted for the error reduction as opposed to writing experience or something else (recall Bartholomae's point at the bottom of page nine, above). But did the students' writing improve? He provides no data. Even without data, though, the consensus in the field, again as explained above, is that improved editing does not make for necessarily better writing. Inversely, had he found an increase in errors, it would not have proved that the students' writing skills had not improved. His results, do, though, support half of his perceived goal of composition instructors, as he states it (and as I pointed out above): "to produce students who can write essay exams and term papers competent in content, structure, style, spelling, grammar and punctuation" (p. 2). As explained in the first two sections of this paper, the degree of importance of the latter "skills" is highly debatable. Even given this debate and the many studies available, I thought it would be interesting to research my own class of freshman composition, as such an undertaking would "animate" the debate for me.

During the 1995 fall semester, I taught freshman composition to 26 students (three of whom dropped out, and two could not be studied because of missing essays). It was my first time teaching freshman composition, as well as my first time grading papers. Therefore, my grading practices may not have been what they should have been. I tried to be consistent in applying the college's writing standards, including the Mechanics Anchor; however, as no one checked my grading on a regular basis, I may not always have been consistent (on a couple of occasions, my mentor and I went over a few essays; I was fairly close to him in mechanics, but about half a grade higher than him in the other areas). Even so, according to Connors and Lunsford, teachers, including experienced teachers, do not always mark errors correctly (1988, p. 400). Hull also speaks of "her surprise at the range of their responses" when she asks "teachers to find and label the errors in students' texts" (1986, p. 223; see also p. 15 above [Daniel & Murphy, 1995; Haswell, 1988; Mullin, 1995]). I did find some inconsistencies in my

marking when I went over my students' essays–errors missed, for example. Also, I did not always mark the errors in the same way (nor did I use a control group). I started to correct the errors for the students, then I just circled and labeled them with the key provided by the course text ("cs", "frag.," "Agr-Sv," etc.) and ended by just putting a check mark in the margin. And sometimes, I would not count an error, such as an omitted comma (it seems that people are leaving more and more commas out, people such as English educators who submit manuscripts to *English Education*, which I help edit). I left it up to the students to come to talk to me personally about the errors–I often encouraged this in the comments section of my grading sheet. I rarely went over grammar in class (I recall only one occasion, when I went over dangling modifiers; I still saw mistakes afterwards). In any case, here are the results to my study (the tables referred to are contained in the appendix).

Table 1 contains the number of errors each student made on each essay. Statistical tests do not show a significant difference between the students' performance on Essay 1 and Essay 5.[4] The tests performed include an analysis of variance (T-Test) and a time series plot. A box plot graph did show that the students were spread out the most on Essay 1 and the least on Essay 2. And there was a highly significant difference between essays in that the students are not performing the same (this was shown by a repeated measures test), which makes sense as there is a wide range of ability in the course, a range I attribute to the fact that no writing sample is required to get into the course. Rather, the gatekeeper used is a computerized sentence-level grammar test written by the Educational Testing Service. Highly ranked students are encouraged to take an honors section of WRIT 121, but they are not required to (and I had at least three of these students in my class). However, again, the rate of error decrease is not significant.

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[4]I gratefully acknowledge the help of Gary Cook at the Michigan State University English Language Center (the ELC's resident statistician and a Ph.D. student in measurement and quantitative method).

Table 2 compares students' mechanics grades and their respective essay grades (excluding mechanics). Tests of correlation show no significant correlation between the mechanics grades and the essay grades; in other words, a student's performance in mechanics does not predict his or her performance on the essay in general, either positively or negatively.

Table 3 compares errors made in the revised essay compared to the original essay (revisions were not mandatory and students were allowed to choose only one of their first four essays to revise [departmental policy]). While the average number of errors went down from 5.7 to 2.5, the difference was not statistically significant. And some students made more errors on the revision than on the original. Why this happened is difficult to say. Based on student comments, I would say that not leaving themselves enough time to work on their essays may be a problem. But this observation is quite unscientific. Shaughnessy's comment about students not knowing versus students knowing but not caring (see pp. 11-12) is perhaps relevant here.

Table 4 gives the Mechanics Anchor's effect on essay grades, if applicable (recall that a paper cannot have a grade that is more than 1.0 above the mechanics grade). Only 20 out of the 105 essays assigned received a lowered grade because of mechanics (19%). And from the table, it can be seen that the Anchor's average effect was to lower papers by .7, which in a way (albeit an unfair way) balances out my tendency to be .5 higher than an experienced teacher (again highly unscientific as only a few of my papers were reviewed by an experienced teacher). In no case did it fail a student.

Table 5 shows a comparison of overall essay grades (excluding mechanics). Again, an analysis of variance between the first essay and the last essay shows that there was no significant difference in performance overall. Thus, it could be said that the quality of writing did not improve on a class-wide basis. Some individual students

did well, however. Again, as shown by Table 2, students' performance in mechanics did not affect their performance on the essay as a whole.

Tables six through nine show individual student error analysis results, some of which support Shaughnessy's assertion that dominant errors will become residual (1977, p. 276 [see p. 15]). Some results of significance: Student 20 (Table 6) improved in comma splices, but made other errors consistently. However, the comma splice problem was Student 20's biggest problem. I individually instructed this student in comma rules, including assigning homework grammar-drill problems. The student came to me voluntarily (responding to a written invitation). Student 8 (Table 7) had less success, even though Student 8 came to see me as well. However, Student 8 did make some progress with comma splices, Student 8's biggest problem (and a problem LCC holds dear, as comma splices are two-point errors). But as Student 8's performance on comma splices improved, Student 8's performance in other areas became worse. Perhaps this is due to his or her concentration on comma splices. And of the five essays, Student 8 received a lowered grade on four because of the mechanics grade (in one case the grade dropped from a 4.0 to a 2.5). To continue, Student 1 (Table 8) also made strides in comma splices, but could not master the spelling problem. Interestingly, some of Student 1's comma splices became run-on sentences, as in the revised essay. Lastly, Student 12 (Table 9) seemed to make negative progress overall. Perhaps this is a case of error correction having a negative effect on writing. Again, it is the comma splice that is the problem. Interestingly, this student did not do a revision, and three of this student's essays were negatively affected by the mechanics grade (one went from a 3.8 to a 3.5, one from a 3.5 to a 3.0, and the last from a 3.3 to a 2.5). Had the student just corrected the mechanical errors in one of his or her essays, he or she could have gotten the higher grade (an especially easy task, as all of the errors were indicated). Also, I suggested that Student 12 come and see me about the problem, but he or she did not; perhaps I should have required it.

While this study is far from conclusive, and despite its flaws (the very flaws that Connors and Lunsford point out, 1988, p. 397 [see p. 15, above]), it was interesting to conduct as it helped me think about the issues raised by the teacher/researchers in the first part of my paper. Given all that I have read and what I have seen happen in my own classes, I agree that teaching grammar does not have much, if any, of an effect on students' writing ability. But also given Shaughnessy's (and others') views on the undesirability of error–it *can* be distracting–I do think techniques for its elimination have a place in the classroom. They should not, however, be negatively reinforced. Students must feel motivation in order to write; negative reinforcement does not foster motivation (and will make the students nervous, as explained by Bartholomae and Laurence above). As for what techniques to use, I have now taken Haswell's advice and give students time in class to edit their essays. I do not circle errors anymore, nor do I provide abbreviated categorizations of errors in the margins. Since I am now teaching at a different institution, I am free to do this. However, while I stick to the check marks, I do not require some kind of mandatory revision. I realize that the students must *look at* the check marks at the very least, but I want the responsibility for revision to come from the students themselves. Whether it does is a topic for a future study. In the end, I agree with Noguchi in that "avoiding grammar . . . because past studies suggest its inefficacy in certain situations seems biased; if a particular student or a section of a class needs instruction, it is irresponsible not to provide it" (as quoted in Claywell, 1995, p. 52).

Appendix: Tables

Table 1

Table 1: Number of Errors					
Student #	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Essay 5
1	13	4	6	3	6
2	1	5	1	2	0
3	8	2	0	9	3
4	10	4	6	8	10
5	8	9	7	20	7
6	10	2	3	1	6
7	5	1	3	6	2
8	15	13	7	10	11
9	1	2	1	0	0
10	2	2	4	6	6
11	4	7	0	11	5
12	1	0	7	8	13
13	5	2	0	4	0
14	3	1	2	7	5
15	1	0	13	1	0
16	5	3	6	0	4
17	17	6	2	3	13
18	1	5	3	1	0
19	4	5	2	4	2
20	15	5	4	3	5
21	2	0	1	1	2
Mean Scores	6.24	3.71	3.71	5.14	4.76
Std. Deviation:	5.11	3.15	3.15	4.69	4.09
T-Test: 1,5	0.32				
T-Test: 1,2	0.07				

Table 2

Table 2: Mechanics Grade vs. Paper Grade (excluding mechanics)										
Student #	Essay 1 Mech.	Essay 1 Grade	Essay 2 Mech.	Essay 2 Grade	Essay 3 Mech.	Essay 3 Grade	Essay 4 Mech.	Essay 4 Grade	Essay 5 Mech.	Essay 5 Grade
1	1.5	2.5	3	3.2	2.5	3.5	3.5	3.3	2.5	3.3
2	4	3.7	3	4	4	4	3.5	3.9	4	4
3	2	1.5	3.5	3.2	4	3.5	2	3.3	3.5	3.2
4	2	3.3	3	2.5	2.5	3.5	2	3.7	2	3
5	2	2.7	2	3.5	2.5	3.5	0	3	2.5	3.2
6	2	3.3	3.5	3.8	3.5	3.5	4	3.5	2.5	3.3
7	3	3.2	4	4	3.5	3.8	2.5	4	3.5	4
8	1	2.5	1.5	4	2.5	4	2	3.8	2	3
9	4	3.5	3.5	2.3	4	2.7	4	3.2	3.5	3.4
10	3.5	3	3.5	4	4	3	2.5	3.9	2.5	2.7
11	3	3.7	2.5	3.2	4	3.8	2	3	3	4
12	4	3.7	4	3.8	2.5	3.8	2	3.5	1.5	3.3
13	3	3.2	4	3.2	4	3.8	3	3.8	4	3
14	3.5	3.3	4	4	3.5	4	2.5	3.8	3	3.8
15	4	3	4	3.8	1.5	3.4	4	3.9	4	3.7
16	3	1.5	3.5	3.5	2.5	2	4	3.7	3	3.2
17	0	1.5	2.5	2.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.7	1.5	3.6
18	4	3.9	3	2.7	3.5	3.5	4	3.7	4	3.8
19	3	3	3	3	3.5	3.5	3	3	3.5	2.8
20	1	3.3	3	3.6	3	3	3.5	4	3	3.9
21	3.5	4	4	2.3	4	3.6	4	2.8	3.5	3.5
Mean Scores	2.71	3.01	3.24	3.34	3.26	3.47	2.93	3.55	2.98	3.41
Std. Deviation:	1.17	0.75	0.70	0.60	0.74	0.47	1.04	0.37	0.80	0.40
Correlation Mech./Grade	0.59		0.06		0.14		0.18		0.32	

Table 3

Table 3: Original Essay vs. Revised Essay		
Student #	Original Essay	Revised Essay
4	4	8
5	8	7
9	2	1
10	6	3
11	11	4
14	3	0
15	1	0
17	17	2
18	5	0
21	0	0
Mean Scores	5.70	2.50
Std. Deviation:	5.17	2.99
T-Test	0.11	
Correlation	0.31	

Table 4

Table 4: Mechanics Anchor's Effect on Grades		
Raw Grade	Revised Grade	Loss in Gr. Pts.
3.3	3	0.3
3.3	3	0.3
3.7	3	0.7
3.5	3	0.5
3	1	2
3.3	3	0.3
4	3.5	0.5
2.5	2	0.5
4	2.5	1.5
4	3.5	0.5
3.8	3	0.8
3.9	3.5	0.4
3.8	3.5	0.3
3.5	3	0.5
3.3	2.5	0.8
3.8	3.5	0.3
3.4	2.5	0.9
1.5	1	0.5
3.6	2.5	1.1
3.3	2	1.3
	Average:	0.7

Table 5

Table 5: Comparison of Essay Grades (Excluding Mechanics)						
Student #	Essay 1 Grade	Essay 2 Grade	Essay 3 Grade	Essay 4 Grade	Essay 5 Grade	Average
1	2.5	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.2
2	3.7	4	4	3.9	4	3.9
3	1.5	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.2	2.9
4	3.3	2.5	3.5	3.7	3	3.2
5	2.7	3.5	3.5	3	3.2	3.2
6	3.3	3.8	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.5
7	3.2	4	3.8	4	4	3.8
8	2.5	4	4	3.8	3	3.5
9	3.5	2.3	2.7	3.2	3.4	3.0
10	3	4	3	3.9	2.7	3.3
11	3.7	3.2	3.8	3	4	3.5
12	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.3	3.6
13	3.2	3.2	3.8	3.8	3	3.4
14	3.3	4	4	3.8	3.8	3.8
15	3	3.8	3.4	3.9	3.7	3.6
16	1.5	3.5	2	3.7	3.2	2.8
17	1.5	2.5	3.5	3.7	3.6	3.0
18	3.9	2.7	3.5	3.7	3.8	3.5
19	3	3	3.5	3	2.8	3.1
20	3.3	3.6	3	4	3.9	3.6
21	4	2.3	3.6	2.8	3.5	3.2
Mean Scores	3.01	3.34	3.47	3.55	3.41	
Std. Deviation:	0.75	0.60	0.47	0.37	0.40	
T-Test: 1,5	0.02					
Correlation 1,5	0.3284					

Table 6: Error Analysis for Student #20: Frequency of Errors

Essay #	it/it's (1 pt.)	CS (2 pts.)	RO (2 pts.)	DM (1 pt.)	AgrPa (1 pt.)	AgrSv (1 pt.)	Pr. (1 pt.)	SP (1 pt.)	, (1 pt.)	W W (1 pt.)	; (1 pt.)	Apos. (1 pt.)	Total Error Points
1		4		1	1	1	1	1	1	1			15
2		2				1							5
3					1					1	1	1	4
4	1		1										3
5						1	1	1[1]		1		1	5
R(1)						1[1]				1[2]			2

Table 7: Error Analysis for Student #8: Frequency of Errors

Essay #	it/it's (1 pt.)	CS (2 pts.)	RO (2 pts.)	FR (2 pt.)	AgrPa (1 pt.)	AgrSv (1 pt.)	SP (1 pt.)	, (1 pt.)	W W (1 pt.)	; (1 pt.)	M W (1 pt.)	Apos. (1 pt.)	Total Error Points
1		4	1	2			1						15
2		4	1			1	2						13
3	1	2					1	1					7
4				1			2		3		2	1	10
5	1	2			1		1		1	1	1	1	11
R(2)		1			1[3]		2[4]						5

Key:

CS = Comma Splice
RO = Run-on Sentence
DM = Dangling Modifier
FR = Fragement
AgrPa = Agreement, pronoun and antecedent
AgrSv = Agreement, subject and verb
Pr. = Parallelism
SP = Spelling
, = Comma
WW = Wrong word
MW = Missing word
; = Semicolon
Apos. = Apostrophe

[1]Same error as in original essay
[2]Same error as in original essay, but the error was not marked in the original essay
[3]Same error as in original essay
[4]New errors

Table 8
Error Analysis for Student #1: Frequency of Errors

Essay #	CS (2 pts.)	RO (2 pts.)	AgrPa (1 pt.)	Pr. (1 pt.)	WP (1 pt.)	, (1 pt.)	SP (1 pt.)	PS (1 pt.)	Apos. (1 pt.)	Total Error Points
1	4		1	1		1	1	1		13
2					1		2		1	4
3	2						1		1	6
4	1						1			3
5		1	1				3			6
R(1)	1.5[1]	2[2]	1[3]				3[4]	1[5]		12

Table 9
Error Analysis for Student #12: Frequency of Errors

Essay #	it/it's (1 pt.)	CS (2 pts.)	FR (2 pt.)	AgrPa (1 pt.)	AgrSv (1 pt.)	SP (1 pt.)	Apos. (1 pt.)	Total Error Points
1						1		1
2								0
3		3					1	7
4	1	1	1		2	1		8
5		5	1	1				13
R (none)								-

Key:

CS = Comma Splice
RO = Run-on Sentence
DM = Dangling Modifier
AgrPa = Agreement, pronoun and antecedent
AgrSv = Agreement, subject and verb
Apos. = Apostrophe
WP = Wrong punctuation
, = Comma
SP = Spelling
PS = Pronoun Switch
Pr. = Parallelism
FR = Fragment

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[1]Both same as in the original essay, but one was not marked in the original essay; counted as 1 point in the revision
[2]Both errors were CS errors in the original essay
[3]Same as in the original essay
[4]Two new errors and one error that was the same as in the original essay
[5]New Error

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